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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAMAKO 001006

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/12/2017  
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [MOPS](#) [PTER](#) [MARR](#) [ML](#)  
SUBJECT: GUNFIGHT IN THE DESERT: A TUAREG DESCRIBES COMBAT  
AGAINST THE AQIM

REF: A. 06 BAMAKO 1243

[1](#)B. BAMAKO 0960

[1](#)C. BAMAKO 0995

Classified By: POLITICAL OFFICER GLENN FEDZER FOR  
REASONS 1.4 (B), (D), and (E)

[1](#)1. (C) Tuareg leader Dayti ag Sidimou described the fire fight between Tuareg tribesmen and the Al Qaida of the Islamic Mahgreb (AQIM) that occurred October 23, 2006 (reftel A) to Embassy officers. Sidimou says that he was present and wounded during the encounter, and reported that Tuareg forces in pursuit of AQIM were instead ambushed themselves, with five Tuaregs killed and two captured. Sidimou elaborated on the equipment, tactics, and forces available to both sides, and believed that the AQIM suffered six fatalities. Sidimou later negotiated the release of the two prisoners, and accused a member of the Malian Directorate for State Security (DGSE), Commandant Ould Bou Lamana (reftel B), of tipping off AQIM to the Tuareg pursuit. Sidimou expressed frustration that Algeria and other foreign powers failed to help the Tuaregs in their fight against the Salafists, and asked that the United States work with the Tuaregs directly instead of through the Malian Government.

[1](#)2. (C) Dayti ag Sidimou from Tessalit is one of four Tuareg members newly elected to the Malian National Assembly, and one of the founding officers of the Alliance for Democratic Change (ADC) (reftel C). A member of the Idnane tribe, he is not close to either ADC leader Iyad ag Ghali or the Tuaregs currently in conflict with the Malian Government, Ibrahim Bahanga and LTC Hassan ag Fagaga.

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TACTICS AND FORCES  
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[1](#)3. (C) Sidimou reports that he was part of the force of approximately 104 Tuaregs that tracked AQIM through the desert for five days until the engagement on 23 October. The Tuaregs were equipped with seven Toyota pickup trucks, two 12.7mm machine guns, and AK-47 Assault rifles. The convoy traveled in three groups in column, with each group racing at top speed to reach the next destination. The group taking the first position would rotate after each day's driving, with the unit guide always traveling with the first group. If contact were made, the first group was prepared to strike out to the right, the second group to the left, and the rear group would take the center of the line.

[1](#)4. (C) 23 October, the Tuaregs had tracked the AQIM to a well near Tekrat (in the Timbuktu region near Araouane) overlooked by a small rocky hill. At 10 AM, the two lead trucks veered to the right out of sight of their companions, where a number of Tuaregs dismounted. The remaining vehicles (minus one that had broken down near the well) followed the tracks up to the base of the hill.

¶15. (C) At that point, Sidimou said that AQIM opened fire with two 14.5 mm machine guns mounted on trucks that had been hidden within the rocky formations. He reported that their forces initially consisted of six trucks, with 2-3 trucks arriving later in the battle. The AQIM trucks mounted a total of two twin barreled 14.5 mm anti-aircraft machine guns and four 12.7 mm machine guns. Sidimou estimated an average of eight AQIM fighters on each truck, totaling some 65 fighters AQIM engaged. AQIM forces were led by Mochtar bel Mochtar, but consisted of a mix of Algerian, Mauritanian, Nigerien, Nigerian, Moroccan, Chadian, and Malian Berabiche (ethnic Arab) followers. Sidimou said the 14.5 mm fire went over their heads, and the group retreated to a zone of rocks and dunes roughly three kilometers away and exchanged long-range machine gun fire. One of the Tuareg 12.7mm machine guns malfunctioned almost immediately, but the other functioned throughout the fight. The trucks that had dropped the Tuaregs off on the right of the hill joined this group when the firing started.

¶16. (C) After a stand-off of nearly an hour, the Tuaregs behind the dunes advanced in mass and took some fire that damaged their trucks, but then noted that AQIM had fled the scene. They discovered five of the Tuaregs who had dismounted on the right of the hill were dead (all from rifle fire) and two others captured. Sidimou later negotiated for their release, and noted that they provided valuable information on AQIM upon their return to Tuareg ranks. Sidimou later recanted this, saying the two were "too traumatized" to say much.

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AFTERMATH: BLAME TO GO AROUND

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¶17. (C) Sidimou claims that ethnic Arab Berabiche in Timbuktu, especially DGSE operative Commandant (Major-equivalent) Ould Bou Lamana, provided advanced warning to the AQIM. When asked if the central government was aware of Lamana's activities, Sidimou said "how can they not be," and indicated that no one could maintain his position in the system without the Government fully aware, and accepting, of his interactions with AQIM.

¶18. (C) The failure of the Tuareg attack was also attributed to the failure of other Tuaregs, particularly the Ifogas tribe of Iyad ag Ghali, to join in the fight. As a consequence, and in the face of Bahanga's attack on the government, the ADC may be unraveling (reftel C).

¶19. (C) Sidimou was highly critical of Algeria and "the West" for failure to support the Tuaregs in their efforts to eliminate AQIM, and suggested that if the USG wanted to eliminate the terrorists, they deal directly with the Tuaregs, rather than try to work through the Malian Government.

¶110. (C) AQIM, for their part, appear to have distanced themselves directly from Tuareg smuggling, but may have leadership issues. Sidimou claims that bel Mochtar's leadership had created a rift within AQIM, with forces camping in two separate locations. A prior assault by Tuaregs may have temporarily fixed this problem, as the Tuaregs believe they faced nearly all of AQIM's forces on October 23rd. Sidimou also said that Al Qaida leaders in Afghanistan had sent a leader in August 2007 to take over the leadership of the AQIM, a post Mochtar refused to relinquish.

¶111. (C) Comment: We can leave to others further tactical assessments of the fight between the AQIM and Tuaregs, but at heart the conflict remains one for commercial dominance. Sidimou, despite his new-found role as a politician, is also

well-known as a smuggler, yet now calls for a peaceful resolution of the conflict between Bahanga and the Malian government around Tinzawaten. He may be sincere, but the fighting between AQIM and the Tuaregs in October may have secured for Sidimou what Bahanga felt was threatened by the Malian military's northern expansion: control of local smuggling networks. For now, Sidimou says that the AQIM leaves Tuareg convoys alone--and he adds that they appear to be well-funded with U.S. dollars to buy food and fuel AQIM needs to continue operations.

McCulley